Religion: an explanatory note¹

Because of Ireland's historical background – the penal laws against Catholics implemented from the late seventeenth century and the novelty of Catholic participation in local and national government – Irish society was extremely self-conscious about religious identity. Schools and other institutions reflected this self-consciousness: any institutions which had their origins in voluntary initiative were run on denominational lines. Catholic nuns were working in at least half of all workhouse hospitals by 1900, and these women – who vastly outnumbered Catholic priests and brothers – were the primary evangelists.²

This was a time of increasingly intensive church-centred practice for all denominations. Many devotional practices from Rome and the Continent were introduced into Catholicism, and there was a greater emphasis on mass attendance. Protestant denominations experienced many revivals, especially in Ulster. The north-east of the country had a concentration of Protestants, although Belfast became progressively more Catholic over this period. Elsewhere, while many (though by no means all) major landowners and 'gentry' were Protestants, there were also concentrations of lower-middle-class and working-class Protestants in all the major cities and, outside the nine counties of Ulster, clusters of Protestant farmers and labourers throughout the country, especially in Wicklow, Wexford, Cork, Limerick, north Tipperary, King's County, Carlow, Kilkenny and Kildare.

People of the Jewish faith, mainly immigrants from Eastern Europe, began to make up a noticeable minority in the bigger cities towards the end of the nineteenth century. They never settled in rural Ireland.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of writings in the English language on Irish religious history, see S. J. Connolly, 'The moving statue and the turtle dove: approaches to the history of Irish religion', *Irish Economic and Social History*, Vol. 31 (2004), pp. 1–22; see also Risteard O Glaisne, *Módhaigh: scéal Eaglaise, scéal Pobail* (Baile Atha Cliath 1998); Louis Hyman, *Jews in Ireland: from earliest times to the year 1910* (Shannon 1972); and Dermot Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Cork 1998).
- 2 Tony Fahey, 'Nuns in the Catholic Church in Ireland in the nineteenth century', in Mary Cullen (ed.), *Girls Don't Do Honours: Irish women in education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Dublin 1987), pp. 7–30; and Caitriona Clear, *Nuns in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin 1987).